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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the findings of a descriptive research project conducted among Southeast Asian parents in an Oregon school district, and discusses the issue of fieldwork methodology among refugee populations. The district studied had a student population of 18,000 (kindergarten through grade 12), with Southeast Asian refugees accounting for 1 percent of the student body. The refugee population was composed of families from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam who entered the United States after June 1979, resided within the school district boundaries, and had children enrolled or eligible for enrollment in public schools or Head Start. A survey instrument was designed to obtain demographic data and refugee parent opinions, and to gather projected enrollment figures of Southeast Asian students in order to help plan for the English as a Second Language and bilingual education programs. The first part of the paper focuses on expressed opinions of refugee parents regarding their children's schools, teachers, and language-related issues. Then, the author discusses the design of the instrument and explores other methodological issues. A sample questionnaire, consisting of five sections dealing with household, school contact, school work, opinions about school, and plans for the following school year, is appended to the paper. (AOS)

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEE PARENT SURVEY

Mary M. Blakely

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN* REFUGEE PARENT SURVEY

Mary M. Blakely

A paper presented at the Oregon Educational Research Association Conference at Newport, 29-30 October 1982.

This paper consists of two parts. First is a summary of descriptive research findings based on individual interviews with Southeast Asian parents in one Oregon school district.[1] That discussion will focus on opinions refugee parents expressed regarding their children's schools, teachers, and language instruction.[2] Special attention is given to language issues inherent in the cross-cultural, cross-language setting. The second part explores some issues in fieldwork methodology among the refugee population.

Conducted as applied research, the survey was designed to obtain demographic information, refugee parent opinions, and projected enrollments of Southeast Asian students to aid planning efforts of the special program for English as a second language and bilingual education. The investigator, accompanied by bilingual translators, interviewed Southeast Asian refugee parents in their homes using a semistructured interview instrument designed especially for the survey.[3] Results were analyzed by ethnic group and age group using descriptive statistics. Interpretation of numerical findings was augmented by information obtained in two years of participant observation fieldwork in the setting.

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* In refugee resettlement literature, "Indochinese" and "Southeast Asian" are both used to refer to people from the countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In this study the Southeast Asian refugees include five ethnolinguistic groups: Chinese-Vietnamese, and Vietnamese from Vietnam, ethnic Lao and Mien from Laos, and Cambodian (also called Khmer) from Cambodia.

The descriptive research was conducted in an Oregon School district of 18,000 students (K-12), in which the Southeast Asian refugee student population was approximately 1% at the time of the survey in June 1982. The population was defined as refugee families from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam who: a)entered the U.S. after June 1979, b)resided within the school district boundaries, and c)had children enrolled in public schools, or children to be enrolled in kindergarten in 1982-83, or children eligible for the Head Start program in 1982-83. Thirty-five families (approximately 78% of the defined population) completed the individual interviews.

The research was guided by the following issues and questions:

1. Student success in school has been found to be heavily influenced by family background characteristics (Coleman, et al. 1966; Jencks, et al. 1972). What are the family background characteristics of the Southeast Asian refugee students in the local schools and how do these characteristics affect their success in school?

2. Research on minority education (Ogbu 1974, for example) emphasizes the complexities of cross-cultural and cross-language communication. How do Southeast Asian parents communicate with people at their children's schools?

3. One of the factors frequently mentioned in contemporary educational research (Brookover, et al. 1979) is the apparent connection between parental support and school success. How do Southeast Asian parents and students feel about their schools in the district?

4. A continuing debate in second language learning and bilingual education is the choice of language used as the medium of instruction. One view from sociolinguistics (Fishman and Lovas 1970) is that instructional programs need to be consistent with the sociolinguistic

"reality" in the local language community. How do Southeast Asian parents perceive their linguistic environment and the language needs of their children?

5. The peoples from mainland Southeast Asia are ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous. How are the Chinese-Vietnamese, Vietnamese, Lao, Mien and Cambodian families in this community different and how are they similar on the above dimensions?

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

What follows is the Executive Summary excerpted from the original full length document (Southeast Asian Parent Survey: Final Report) dated July 1982.

Census

Thirty-five families live in 32 households with a median size of six persons per household. There are 195 persons in these households ranging in age from 6 months to over 50 years of age. There are 90 children enrolled in grades K-12 in the district's public schools.[4] Most of these children live with either one or both of their parents, but fewer Vietnamese children live with their parents. Families in this survey live in two "clusters" of multiple- family housing units in two areas of the city. Vietnamese families live in the Westside Region; Lao-and-other (Lao-Mien-Cambodian) families live in an older central downtown area.

There are 75 male and female adults of employable age. One-third of these adults were employed at the time of the survey; one-third were community college students in training programs; and the others were unemployed. Housewives account for most of those unemployed adults. The highest rate of working women is among Vietnamese. Sixty-five percent of the employed adults are in unskilled entry-level

jobs. Restaurants are the biggest employers of the adults in this survey. All families have a television that is used for news and entertainment as well as a tool for learning English. Seventy-five percent of the families have radios that are seldom used for news or information; and only twenty percent take a newspaper. Nearly all households have a telephone. Nearly sixty percent of the families said they have an American sponsor who continues to help them if they need assistance with school-related matters.

Family Origins

Lao families are the largest ethnic group in the sample; Mien and Cambodian families are the smallest numbers. Lao, Mien, and Cambodian families came from rural and small town areas where the adults had limited educational opportunities. Over one-third of these adults are illiterate in their native languages. Other Lao families came from the urban area of Vientiane where some parents had secondary and post-secondary education. Vietnamese families are the second largest group in the study. Half of the Vietnamese are ethnic Chinese. All Vietnamese adults are literate in at least one language other than English; many had educational opportunities in higher education. Nearly all are from middle-class backgrounds and came from Saigon and the Mekong River Delta Region of South Vietnam.

Another important difference is the length of time spent in transition between the country of origin and arrival in the U.S.A. Vietnamese families spent much less time in refugee camps than families from Laos and Cambodia. Half of the families have been in the U.S.A. for 18 months to 3 years, and half for 18 months or less.

School Contact

Most parents said they had been to their children's school. Half of these contacts were CELC-initiated functions. Approximately 35% of

all parents said they had attended a parent-teacher conference. The percentage of Vietnamese parent-teacher conferences was twice as high as for other parents.

When students bring home printed memos from school for their parents there is usually someone (adult or child) in the household who can read the English message and follow the directions, according to parent responses. Vietnamese parents are more able to read the letters themselves. Lao parents are more likely to have their children tell them what the letter says. Parents see and respond to letters from elementary school children more than secondary children. If a letter requires a parental permission with a signature and request for return to the school, it is more likely to receive attention from children and parents. Even with the illiteracy rate among adults, there are only 4 households in which no adult can read native language; in all but one of these a teenage child is able to read native language. These literacy reports are encouraging since there seems to be little basis for the idea that families are unable to read messages in <u>any</u> language.

Homework is considered a good thing. No one complained about the load being too heavy at any grade level. All high school students do homework on a daily basis and work independently. Junior high students sometimes do homework at home (80%) and sometimes do it at school. Their parents are not so sure these children are really keeping up with homework since the students prefer not to have help from their parents. This age group is more likely to "default" on homework without their parents knowing about it. Parents are more likely to monitor and help their elementary children with homework, though only half have homework. Most of these are intermediate grade children. The only primary children who reported having homework

attended schools in the Westside Region and the south region.

Native Language Literacy Instruction

According to their parents, many older children already know how to read and write the family language. Most parents said they wanted their children to learn to read and write in native language, and would like the schools to provide instruction by a native speaker. The strongest response came from Chinese-Vietnamese parents who would like the school to provide a Chinese teacher (Chinese was not part of the bilingual program). They feel their children will be able to use Chinese literacy skills as adults in American society and would be handicapped if they could not read and write Chinese. The other linguistic groups were less specific about their interest in native language instruction. They expressed global preferences for the positive value of being able to read and write the family language and thought it would be nice if the schools would teach their children.

Only 8 parents said, "No", they did not want their children to have native literacy instruction. They thought there was no point in learning to read anything but English now that they are in America. "There are no Lao books in America," is the way one father put it. For these parents English is the most important thing for their children to know and they fear studying two languages at once will interfere with the English-learning. All parents expect their children to retain oral fluency in the family language.

What Parents Like About Schools

These parents do not really know what they want their children to learn at school since they are not familiar with the school system. Most often (70%) they said their children should learn "everything" the school teaches. English was mentioned most often; then math. Parents like "everything" about the schools in Cascade, especially the

teachers, the other students, English instruction and math. The schools received high praise from parents whose children had previously been enrolled in larger urban American schools before migrating to Cascade. These parents like the schools for the same reasons non-refugee parents like Cascade schools: good teachers, good facilities, friendly peer interaction, small classes. We asked parents what was "not good" about schools and 86% of them answered "nothing!" Parents are proud of their children for learning to read in English, and believe their children are learning English well in school.

What Children Like About School

Parents are certain their children like to go to school (and the children agree), but they do not really know what they like about it. We learned that generally children do not tell their parents much about school. Children reported most often that they liked math; then teachers and classmates; reading, writing, and English; and P.E. Young children also liked drawing and playing. Children said the teachers are nice and help them. While most parents and children said there are no problems with school, there were four kinds of problems reported: 1) a specific incident at school, 2)academic difficulties, 3)fighting among children, and 4)problems specifically related to the design of the language program. This last category provides some useful program feedback from the students' perspective.

Plans for Next School Year

If we listen to these families, nobody is leaving Cascade soon! Only two families had plans to move during the summer to another state. The overwhelming majority (80%) said they were staying right here and the rest were undecided at the time of the survey. Parents were optimistic that they could obtain seasonal work until something

better came along. They like the social environment here and do not wish to go to larger cities in search of work; they think this is a better place for their children to be. Some have explored possibilities of other states and cities but have not been encouraged. It seems that they are also satisfied with their current living arrangements. Any moves will probably continue the trend to live close to others of the same ethnic group. School enrollment for next fall will likely be about the same as it was for this census.

METHODOLOGY

A six page interview instrument entitled CELC PARENT INTERVIEW-HOME VISIT was designed for this survey. The five sections: HOUSEHOLD; SCHOOL CONTACT; SCHOOL WORK; OPINIONS ABOUT SCHOOL; and PLANS FOR NEXT SCHOOL YEAR, were written to elicit information from parents about home-school communication patterns, linguistic preferences, bilingual instruction, and parent involvement in school work, as well as a preliminary census of students expected for the following school year. (See the attached sample instrument.)

The method of data collection was in contrast to Cameron (1980) who judged questionnaires to be more appropriate for his survey of highly educated Indochinese parents. In this particular setting, face-to-face translated interviews were chosen as a way of obtaining more data with greater clarity and a higher completion rate than mailed out questionnaires. Adult literacy was one of the questions to be addressed by the research. Based on experiences throughout the school year, the staff realized that most parents were not literate in English, and believed many were not literate in their native language.

The interview instrument was developed in consultation with bilingual assistants who reviewed the wording of items and made suggestions regarding culturally appropriate communication strategies

with parents. Questions were formulated as clearly as possible using "maximally translatable English" (Werner and Campbell 1970) to minimize ambiguity for the translators. The instrument was piloted prior to use in the survey.

Studies involving cross-cultural and cross-language communication present particular challenges for researchers. A certain level of trust is required to obtain candid responses to questions dealing with personal family information and opinions about school. Previous parent conversations throughout the year led me to believe that parents were more likely to respond to acquaintances than to strangers. Therefore, my previous interactions with several parents through school activities and home visits during the 1980-81 and 1981-82 school years were an advantage.

I was also guided by suggestions from Southeast Asian bilingual professionals in other Oregon communities on the advantages of using translators who were familiar with the families as well as with the schools (Oregon State Department of Education 1982). Previous experiences with the three translators (Cambodian, Lao, Vietnamese) gave me confidence in their familiarity with the school program and their knowledge of the families in the community. I met with each translator to make certain interview items were understood (for translation clarity) and to familiarize each with the reasons for the questions and the procedures to be followed.

Interviews were conducted during the final three weeks of the school year (to obtain information as close as possible to the next school year), and at times convenient for families, usually in the late afternoon and early evening hours. Each translator telephoned families of that ethnic group to set up appointments in advance. There were 35 completed interviews out of 45 families defined by the

selection criteria. All the Lao families were interviewed. Two Mien and two Vietnamese families were missed due to scheduling problems. The parents of one high school student from Cambodia had moved away prior to the survey. The remaining Vietnamese households were those in which the only students were graduating seniors, or the high school students were living independently and hence had no parents to be interviewed.

Families of one ethnic group frequently lived close together, so we often met several families during a 2-4 hour session. A total of thirty nours was spent conducting interviews, which took between 20-75 minutes each. When all members of a large family were present, more time was required as everyone wanted to participate.

Since we did not know in advance which language would be best for each interviewee, all interviews used the English survey instrument and oral translation. I always read each item on the survey instrument aloud in English first. Then the translator repeated the question in the parent's native language, listened to the response and then translated it into English so I could record the response on the form. Parents usually responded to questions in native language, but sometimes used English. In a few cases, the entire interview was conducted in English. The Vietnamese translator was able to converse with Chinese-Vietnamese parents. The small number of Mien used Thai to converse with the Lao translator.

Items were written as open-response questions. To make recording faster, and facilitate tabulation and analysis, several possible responses were provided on the interview form. These were marked to reflect the answer given by the parent. If none of the choices fit the parent's answer, the response was written in the space for "other" answers. At times responses were recorded verbatim to allow for

reporting of specific quotations.

Parents were asked to refer to their "Immigration Papers" for official recording of birthdates, birthplaces, date of entry to the U.S. and "I-94 Numbers." All other items were "self-report" questions that respondents answered from personal knowledge and by stating their opinions.

Steps were taken to standardize conditions of the data collection. Each interview was conducted in the respondent's home, at a prearranged time, with a bilingual translator, and using the same interview instrument. However, there was considerable variation in paraphrasing and rewording the items in native language to facilitate fuller comprehension by each respondent. The same interviewer conducted all 35 interviews. All families of one ethnic group had the same bilingual translator. All parents were given the same instructions at the beginning of the interview. A copy of the interview instrument is appended.

NOTES

1. This survey was originally conducted for the special language program known as the Center for English Language and Culture (CELC) in an Oregon school district that has been assigned the pseudonym Cascade. The original full length report, "Southeast Asian Parent Survey: Final Report", was submitted to the CELC program director in July 1982. I wish to thank Jeannine Bertrand, Glen Fielding, Jeanne McGee and Harry Wolcott for their comments on the original report. I am solely responsible for any errors.

2. The district received a small Title VII grant to provide "transitional" bilingual support services for 1980-1983. Consistent with some theories of second language learning, bilingual paraprofessionals were hired to teach literacy skills in the children's native languages: Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese.

3. The help of bilingual assistants was essential to this study. Thanks to Mr. Soulichanh Bouaravong and Mr. Hoi Khuong. I am especially grateful to Mrs. Dong Dang, Mr. Bunarith Chuon, and Mrs. Naly Souvannakhot.

4. These numbers are conservative. Not included are other Southeast Asian students in the district whose families arrived between 1975-79. The numbers of children reported in this survey were accurate for those families interviewed. The numbers of persons over school age were incomplete, however. For purposes of this study, we were more interested in a census of school age and preschool age children than in young people over school age. Young adults (18-25) seemed to be a mobile group, making a count on a house-to-house basis uncertain. I personally knew of relatives of the 35 families in this census who were not residing in households containing school age children at the time of the survey, so are not counted in this census.

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(cover letter)

PARENT INTERVIEW--HOME VISIT

administered in May and June, 1982

PURPOSE:

1. Survey of possible students in the CELC program for next fall. (sections A and E)
2. Inquire about the communication patterns between schools and home, especially linguistic preferences. (section B)
3. Find out how involved parents are in children's homework. (section C)
4. Survey opinions about bilingual instruction. (section D)

Some of the information will be a duplication of data already on file in the CELC office. When possible, those items will be skipped to avoid repetition. The interview form will indicate such on the form and go right on to opinion statements.

INSTRUCTIONS:

The interviewer and translator will go to the homes of families already on the CELC census list. We will ask for other family names of people in the same area. The interviewer reads each item aloud in English, it is translated orally, then translator tells interviewer what parent response was. Interviewer records all information on the forms in English. Data in the "census" items will be recorded carefully. Parents will be asked to show the children's I-94 papers. Some items are recorded by check marks (✓); circles; and some underlined. If a parent is not able to answer any item, or does not want to, it will be marked "NA"(Not Answered). Some items will be blank for obvious reasons. Each survey form is coded for purposes of record-keeping (numbering the copies). The writing on these forms is the only record of the interview responses.

STATEMENT TO PARENTS:

"Hello, my name is _____ and I work for the schools. This is _____ and he/she also works for the schools and is here to translate for us. The people at school are planning for the next school year. We are going to many homes to talk to parents about their children and school. We would like to ask you some questions. It will take about 30 minutes."

Code: __ _____

District CENTER FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE Date: _____

Interviewer: _____

PARENT INTERVIEW--HOME VISIT Translator: _____

A. HOUSEHOLD

1.a. Family Name _____ Ethnic group: _____

b. Address _____ phone _____

c. Number of people in Household _____

2. Head of Household

a. Name _____ Relationship _____

b. Place of Birth _____

c. Date of Entry to U.S. _____ Occupation _____

d. "What languages do you speak?" _____

_____

_____

e. "What languages do you read and write?" _____

_____

3. Other Adults in household

	Name	(relationship)	occupation	Speak	Write
a.					
b.					
c.					

4. Children in household (in order from oldest to youngest)

a. Name _____ Sex ____ Age _____

Birthdate _____ Place of Birth _____

Date of Entry _____ I94 Number _____

Languages spoken _____

School _____ Grade _____

b. Name _____ Sex ____ Age _____

Birthdate _____ Place of Birth _____

Date of Entry _____ I94 Number _____

Languages spoken _____

School _____ Grade _____

c. Name _____ Sex ____ Age _____

Birthdate _____ Place of Birth _____

Date of Entry _____ I94 Number _____

Languages spoken _____

School _____ Grade _____

A. HOUSEHOLD (continued)

4.d. Name _____ Sex ____ Age _____

Birthdate _____ Place of Birth _____

Date of Entry _____ I94 Number _____

Languages spoken _____

School _____ Grade _____

e. Name _____ Sex ____ Age _____

Birthdate _____ Place of Birth _____

Date of Entry _____ I94 Number _____

Languages spoken _____

School _____ Grade _____

f. Name _____ Sex ____ Age _____

Birthdate _____ Place of Birth _____

Date of Entry _____ I94 Number _____

Languages spoken _____

School _____ Grade _____

g. Name _____ Sex ____ Age _____

Birthdate _____ Place of Birth _____

Date of Entry _____ I94 Number _____

Languages spoken _____

School _____ Grade _____

h. Name _____ Sex ____ Age _____

Birthdate _____ Place of Birth _____

Date of Entry _____ I94 Number _____

Languages spoken _____

School _____ Grade _____

5.a. "Do you have an American sponsor?" yes no

b. "Does your sponsor help with school matters?" yes no

c. Sponsor name _____

6. Which of these things are in the house?

___T.V. ___telephone ___record player ___books (English)

___radio ___tape recorder ____newspaper ___books (native lang.)

(Check here _____ if more pages are added for names of household members.)

B. SCHOOL CONTACT

1.a. "Have you (parents) ever been to your child's (children's) school?"

yes no

b.

Which child?	Which school?	How often?

c. Reasons for going: (underline appropriate responses)

enroll child teacher conference attend program "Open House"

other:_____

d. "How did you get to the school?"

walk car bus sponsor friend liaison

2.a. "Do people from school ever come to your house?"

yes no

b. "Who came to see you?"

teacher nurse bilingual aide principal counselor liaison

c. "What school did that person come from?"_____

d. "Was there a translator present?" yes no

e. "Who translated?"_____

3.a. "Do people from school ever telephone you?"

yes no

b. "Who telephoned you from school?"

teacher nurse bilingual aide principal counselor liaison

other:_____

c. Reason for the call:_____

_____

d. "Was the phone call in English?" yes no

e. "Did you understand it?" yes no

f. "What do you usually do if you cannot understand the person speaking to you on the telephone?"

_____

_____

4. "Who do you ask for help when you want to talk to someone at your child's (children"s) school?"_____

B. SCHOOL CONTACT (continued)

5.a. "What do you (parents) do with the letters from school that are written in English?"

___some adult is able to read them and follow directions

___a child in the house reads them and tells parent directions

___a bilingual friend reads them and tells parent directions

___parent calls a friend on the phone to ask about it

___nobody can read them; they are discarded

other:_____

6.a. "What do you (parents) do with the letters from school that are written in _____?"
(native language)

___an adult reads them and follows directions

___a child in the house reads them and follows directions

___a bilingual friend reads them and tells parents directions

___ parent calls a friend on the phone to ask about it

___nobody can read _____; they are discarded
(native language)

other:_____

C. SCHOOL WORK

1. "What do you do with the work children bring home that they have done in school?"

___look at them with the child; child explains

___show the work to other people to show what child is learning in school

___child uses school work to "teach" other children at home

___nothing; the child keeps work, does not give to parents

___ nothing; nobody knows what it is; discarded

___child does not bring work home to parents

other:_____

2.a. "Do your children do 'homework' at home?"

child	grade	kind of work done at home

b. "Do you ever talk to children about their homework?" yes no

c. "Can you help them with their homework?" yes no

d. "What kind of homework can you help with?"_____

D. OPINIONS ABOUT SCHOOL

1.a. "Do you think your children should learn to read and write English?"

yes no

b. "Where should children learn English?"

___school other:_____

___home

___church

c. "Who should teach children English?"

___school teachers other:_____

___parents

___friends

2.a. "Do you think your children should learn to read and write _____?"
(native language)

yes no undecided already knows

b. "Where do you think your children should learn to read and write _____?"

___school other:_____

___home

___church

c. "Who should teach children _____?"
(native language)

___teachers ___bilingual aides

___parents ___other:_____

___friends

3.a. "Are you (parents) learning English?" yes no

b. "Where are you learning English?"_____

4. "What do you think your children should learn in school here ?

_____

_____

5.a. "What do you like about the schools here in the district ?"

_____

_____

b. "What is not good about the schools here in ?"

_____

_____

D. OPINIONS ABOUT SCHOOL (Continued)

6.a."Do you think your children are learning English well in school?"

yes no don't know

b."Have you heard your child read in English?" yes no

7.a. "Do you think your children like to go to school?"

yes no

b. "What are some things your children like about school?"

_____

_____

_____

c. "What are some problems your children tell you about school?"

_____

_____

_____

E. PLANS FOR NEXT SCHOOL YEAR

1.a. "Is your family planning to move out of soon?" yes no undecided

b. "What month will you move?"_____

c. "Where will you live?"_____

d. "Will your children be in school in another city?"_____

2.a. "Will you still be living in when school opens next September?"

yes no undecided

b. "Will you be moving to a different residence during the summer?"

yes no undecided

3.a. "Will there be a child in this house going to school for the first time next September?" yes no

b. Name_____sex____Age_____

4.a."Do you expect any new family members to move to during the summer?" yes no don't know

b. Family name_____relationship_____

c. Children_____

G. OPEN COMMENTS

1."Thank you for your help. The people in the schools like to know about the families of the students. This will help us help the students."

2."Do you have any questions or things to say about the schools?"

(write open remarks here)